

Old Post Office  
(Kamehameha V Post Office)  
Merchant and Bethel Streets  
Honolulu  
Honolulu County  
Hawaii

HABS No. HI-7

*HABS  
HI,  
2-HONLU,  
22-*

PHOTOGRAPHS

REDUCED COPIES OF MEASURED DRAWINGS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey  
National Park Service  
Department of the Interior  
Washington, D. C. 20240

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

HABS  
HI,  
2. HONOLU,  
20-

OLD POST OFFICE (KAMEHAMEHA V POST OFFICE)

HABS No. HI-7

ADDRESS: Merchant and Bethel Streets, Honolulu, Hawaii

OWNER: State of Hawaii

OCCUPANT: Traffic Court, City and County of Honolulu

USE: First Floor - Traffic Court and Offices  
Second Floor - Vacant

ARCHITECTURAL AND HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE

The two-story building of classic design was at the time of its erection one of the outstanding public buildings in the Hawaiian Kingdom. It is particularly significant in the history of building construction since the structure made early use of concrete in the form of large blocks, laid as ashlar for exterior bearing walls, together with the use of iron bars for reinforcement of formed structural concrete.

DATE OF ERECTION

Cornerstone laid March 2, 1870; occupied March 22, 1871 by the post office and newspaper Polynesian. Additions made in 1900 and the 1920's.

ARCHITECT-BUILDER

J. G. Osborne, originally of England.

## HISTORICAL INFORMATION

As early as May 1849, a postal system was rumored for Honolulu, to connect with the one established at San Francisco, but it was some eighteen months before a service was actually established by Act of the Privy Council December 21, 1850. This was ratified by the legislature in September 1851 and provision was made for an issue of postage stamps; 5 and 13 cent denominations for letter and 2 cents for papers. The Polynesian in August 1859 noted that stamps had become very popular and a positive incentive to letter writing -- decidedly fashionable and even a token of respectability on a small scale. The new postal service had been granted to H. M. Whitney as a business concession, more or less regulated by the Hawaiian Government, and he tucked it into a corner of the Polynesian office where he also served as editor. In 1854, Whitney severed his connection with the government paper and rented space for his post office in Honolulu Hale, the next-door government office building. The Polynesian building, a two-story coral structure built in 1847 on the corner of Bethel and Merchant Streets, stood until 1869 when it was torn down to make way for the new Post Office Building. <sup>1</sup>

A separate Post Office Building had been suggested as early as 1854, but was not built. With the move to Honolulu Hale, that building came to be known as the Post Office Building. Whitney had a stationery store there, the Hawaiian Gazette was printed there, and various other business offices were offered for rent over the years. Occasionally it also housed government offices. In 1866, this old Post Office Building (Honolulu Hale) was thoroughly overhauled by Theodore C. Heuck, Honolulu's first architect, including the construction of a new lookout and telegraph tower on the roof. <sup>2</sup>

The postal service throughout this period consisted of a series of boxes, lettered and quickly leased, into which private mail was delivered. General delivery mail was still dumped into a central location; everyone dug through to find their own. In 1856, Whitney gave up his post office business to start a newspaper, the Pacific Commercial Advertiser, and J. Jackson became postmaster; he died in 1859 and was succeeded by A. K. Clarke who served until 1862. David Kalakaua held the position until 1865, when A. P. Brickwood took over. Brickwood improved the native letter service by installing a separate department with 85 lock boxes; previously, native letters were merely dumped into an open box, an accommodation similar to that provided foreigners before 1850. <sup>3</sup>

Beginning in 1868, the legislature appropriated funds for the erection of a new Post Office Building. It was widely charged in the opposition press that what was really wanted was a new office for the government press on its entire upper floor and even to overflow and take up room on the first floor. It was felt, as the very least, that if the building was to be called the "Post Office," that that service should be granted the major portion of the floor space in which to adequately provide for the rapidly increasing volume of local and foreign mail being sent by foreigners and by Hawaiians, alike. (For the biennial 1868-70, a tally of letter mail showed: Foreigners-sent, 39,353; Foreigners-Received, 54,976; Native-Sent, 50,485; Native Received, 51,153.)

The cornerstone for the new building was laid March 2, 1870, and a tin box containing various government artifacts was placed beneath the column. The Report of the Minister of Finance to the legislature in June 1870, noted that the original plans had called for a two story structure using the material from the old press building (and the \$9000 appropriated in 1868), but that coral was unsatisfactory and so a new material was being used, allowing the design to be enlarged to three stories. The cost was projected at about \$16,000. The third floor was never built; the final cost was \$18,362.94. 4

The new structure was built of concrete by Mr. J. G. Osborne. Osborne was apparently a Yorkshireman "thoroughly experienced in all the process of brickmaking in Great Britain" whose arrival date in Honolulu is still not clear. In March of 1866, his brickmaking experiments were noted in the Honolulu papers, and by September of that year he was offering 200,000 bricks for sale. Using his own bricks, he built the Janion Green store on Kaahumanu Street, completed in late September 1866. The papers called him "a mechanic of judgment and taste." He built a Government Bonded Warehouse of coral with slate-covered pitched roof in 1867, design by Stirling, Superintendent of Public Works; in April 1868, he began the Godfrey Rhodes store on Kaahumanu Street, a structure of lava stone and foreign brick (from a recently dismantled chimney) with a roof of corrugated iron, new for Honolulu but common in Victoria where the roofing material had been bought. He had apparently been unwell immediately prior to beginning this store, for the papers note the return to business of this "stirring, intelligent master-mechanic." The store was finished in late 1868. In November of 1869, he had just completed in only five months, an addition to the Castle and Cooke store on King Street, built of black stone

laid in lime, with a cement finish to resemble the older part of the building. The corners were laid with blocks of concrete. It is noted that Mr. Osborne was to go immediately to the post office. One Williams, on Fort Street, already had "the honor of being the first gentleman in Honolulu who has largely used concrete in the construction of a large store." 5

The use of concrete in Honolulu, while not new, was not common. A sugar house on Maui was said to have been built in 1863-64 with concrete corners and lintels, and the Castle and Cooke store had corners laid with blocks of concrete. Furthermore, the post office was the first building to be erected solely of concrete, and there were doubts expressed as to its adaptability. Soon after the cornerstone had been laid, however, the papers were saying that a look at the blocks and columns already completed (cast) should dispel all doubts. As it progressed, the community came to think of it as not only the best material for the climate, but an architectural ornament to the city, reflecting great credit alike on the builder and those who had inaugurated the construction of buildings of this material, calculated to withstand "the gnawing tooth of time, or the wars of the elements -- everything, in fact, except the uncertain convulsion of mother earth." (This last is a reference to a recent, and most unique earthquake in Honolulu. The quake triggered a whole series of newspaper articles on the virtues of wood vs stone for building material in Honolulu.) There was a series of articles on the generally poor quality of Honolulu's workmen, making for slow progress. It was noted that the post office construction had suffered additional delay due to the extreme care taken by the Superintendent of Public Works in allowing the concrete blocks to dry slowly - by constantly wetting down - so as to produce a hard and durable product. The result was a building "as firm as though built of solid granite."

The new building was officially occupied on March 21, 1871, the Postmaster General having moved in on March 16. On April 5, the current government newspaper, the Hawaiian Gazette, moved into the building, occupying the entire upper floor and portions of the first floor, and reopening the matter of the unpopular press building being erected under the guise of a post office appropriation. The PCA said it was as appropriate to designate this the "Post Office" as it was to call the Court House the "Marshall's Office", of Honolulu Hale the "Home Office." 6

The post office proper occupied the rest of the ground floor and had 280 lock boxes (90 of which were reserved as a native department) which were rented for \$6 per year, a fee considered exorbitant at the time. The building was said to have the finest ornamental painting in town, done by Dickson, of King Street. Postal service was enhanced by new stamps received in February from the National Bank Note Company of New York in 1, 6 and 18 cent denominations, portraying respectively Her late Royal Highness Victoria, His Majesty the King, and His late Highness M. Kekuanaoa, father of Kings Kamehameha IV and V. Harpers Monthly for October 1871 called this set the "neatest and best executed" of the entire series.<sup>7</sup>

The new building seems to have triggered other improvements in the general area. "Neat and substantial" sidewalks had been laid from in front of the post office down Merchant Street to the Advertiser building, and the opposite side of the street was soon to be similarly provided. (The sidewalks had to be protected: a native was fined \$2 in Police Court for riding over the new concrete sidewalks near the Advertiser office, by way of a warning to all future horsemen.) Curb stones were used in forming the sidewalks, imported from Japan, costing \$1.05 each. They were supposed to be soft enough to cut as cheese, and it was wondered why a local product, hard as flint and made by Mr. Osborne the architect, had not been used, especially since the product cost only 75 cents. It was suggested that a nice improvement along the same lines would be to lay stone street crossings as well - during a recent rain some wag had put signs on the deeper Merchant Street mud holes noting the depth as 8 Fathoms. Honolulu roads were consistently the subject of much complaint throughout the rainy season for their generally impassable condition. During the dry season, the streets were watered to keep the dust down. In September 1871, a newspaper noted that someone had maliciously cut the hose at the post office building, and suspicion pointed to some youths who had been frequenting the post office verandah.

Implanted at the corner of Bethel and Merchant Streets were two objects, possibly left over from the old Honolulu Fort, which often found use as hitching posts. "Seeing two twenty-four pounder cannon lying in front of the new Post Office Building, a stranger inquired what they were intended for. He was gravely informed that they were for the use of the Postmaster General to announce the arrival and departure of the mails. One to be fired ten minutes before the opening of the general delivery and the other ten minutes before the closing of the office.

The stranger walked away musing on the queer customs of Hawaii, never dreaming that the old guns were intended for corner posts." These show clearly in early pictures of the post office corner. 8

The verandah at the front of the building provided shelter for patrons at the lock boxes and stamp windows and provided the setting for an early bit of professional advertising in Honolulu. A Mr. W.M. Wallace arrived from San Francisco in early 1871 and set himself up as a general advertising and collecting agent. He began by printing the advertisements of business firms on their envelopes, and in April set up another novelty,-- an advertising bulletin board outside the door of the post office, with each advertiser having a separate compartment thereon. Within a week another bulletin board was to be seen on the same porch, this one bearing a specimen of the government newspaper being printed upstairs, a "smeared looking hand bill" as the opposition called it. 9

Another bulletin board had been suggested the previous month, by way of a listing for the convenience of strangers, to show the postage rates to various other post offices of the world, and the closing times of the office. This would be more reasonable than the cannon announcement, but never seems to have been put into operation. Brickwood, the Postmaster, was a conscientious but prickly person; the files are full of letters complaining of his arbitrary handling of postal matters to the inconvenience of the general public. Very few innovations were instituted under his leadership. 10

The new building suffered rain damage in a kona storm late in 1874, and Brickwood asked that the roof and verandah be repaired to prevent serious damage to the mail. A newspaper article reported that the verandah leaked profusely, as, in fact it did with every rainfall, thereby demonstrating the unfitness and insecurity of "that excrescence over the Post Office" which ought to be repaired or removed. Early photographs show a verandah covering only the first floor, the second floor being uncovered and the windows protected only by shutters. The lock boxes, at this period, occupy only the Bethel corner archways fronting the verandah. 11

Over the years, the other rooms of the post office were rented out for office space, meeting rooms and for a printing establishment. H. M. Whitney leased the upper floor while publishing the Hawaiian Gazette as an independent paper in the late 1870's. Robert Grieve

leased the upper floor and the lower rear room, with a privilege of entry by the rear gate, when he was publishing the Gazette in the 1880's. Harmony Lodge #3, I.O.O.F. withdrew their request for space in 1882. The next year application was made for rooms in the post office for use by the overcrowded police court - other arrangements were finally made for the court. It was not until 1894 that the post office took over the entire building for postal use. 12

As of January 1, 1882, Hawaii joined a Universal Postal Union and new stamps and postal cards were printed in denominations adequate to the new international rates. Parcel post arrangements were expanded regularly. In May of 1883, an inter-island postal money order service was inaugurated. This quickly became popular and late the next year was expanded by affiliation with the U.S. Postal Money Order system. Under Whitney, Postmaster again in 1884, the legislature approved a Postal Savings Bank Act. Systems in other countries were investigated, and it was not until July 1886 that the bank was officially opened. King Kalakaua was issued passbook #1 for a deposit of \$1000. The new bank was opposed by those trying to control government banking, but nevertheless managed to issue during the first six months of operations some 461 passbooks showing mostly small deposits totalling \$51,892.28. Both deposits and passbooks issued doubled the next year (1888), in part because Bishop and Company gave up paying interest on their savings accounts - the postal bank paid 5% tax-free interest and offered prompt repayment. The new bank was so successful a source of government income that no public bonds were issued in 1888. 13

With this expanding service, it was suggested in 1883 that a separate window be set aside for the sale of stamps and the registering of letters, perhaps on the Bethel Street door to the premises (as other space was not yet available for postal needs), although this area was rather exposed to the weather. H. M. Whitney made extensive repairs in 1884, including two new windows, additional lock letter boxes and general improvements to the first floor rooms. He also instituted a system of 12 iron street letter-boxes from which regular pick-ups were made twice a day. Mail handling was made more efficient and late mails could now be forwarded with a slight extra charge instead of having to wait for the next regular mail. The building was also equipped with 3 iron safes for the money order business. That February 14th, Whitney instituted the first regular delivery service made by carrier in Honolulu, thereby greatly aiding the distribution of valentines. This latter service required that the residences in the suburbs be properly numbered, a necessity still incomplete at the time of his

annual report to the Minister of the Interior, March 31, 1884. In the same report, Whitney recommended that the Government obtain for its Post Office Department a monopoly on the telephone and telegraph arrangements, then being introduced into the Islands. Such control was common in most countries, the United States being a notable exception. This was not done. 14

The next several years saw additions and improvements to the post office amounting to several thousand dollars a year. By 1890, it was recommended to the legislature that an addition would soon be required to handle the rapidly expanding operation. That year the building was reported to be suffering badly for want of paint. 15

In 1893, the plaster interior was calcimined, the ceiling timber painted, the window and door frames varnished and the letter boxes scraped and oiled. A new stamp window cost about \$95. An estimate for major refitting of 1894 included costs for iron columns and girders, new windows, assorted partitions, outside stairs, elevator, and plastering and painting. This work entirely rearranged and refitted the post office, according to the Report of 1894. The main floor was now devoted to general mail distribution for various nationalities (there were separate windows for Hawaiian, Japanese, and Portuguese patrons, a ladies window and a stamp window) and the second floor was given over to the savings bank, money order, registration and parcel post divisions.

The next year more repairs were recommended by the Minister of the Interior in his Report of December 31, 1895. These would include "putting in of a new front on Merchant Street, to be composed entirely of iron and glass. This...will double the amount of light in the main office, thereby greatly aiding distribution, and, by removing the present cumbersome concrete pillars, will give considerable more box room... It is proposed, in carrying out this improvement, to grade the new system of boxes and drawers, both in size and price, so as to meet the varied wants and demands of business firms, families and private persons." Also noted under the heading "Electric Light" is this item: "The number of incandescent lights furnished free by the Government is as follows: Post Office.....32." In 1895, the system of street letter boxes, tried briefly during Whitney's administration, was re-established with twice a day collections. In 1898, the entire front of the building was removed and 1000 brass-front lock boxes were installed (as recommended in 1895), replacing the 400 previously available. 16

By 1900, the service had quite outgrown its building and an addition was built across the back of the old building along Bethel Street. This structure was two stories, built of lava stone and brick with an exterior cement plastering to resemble the old building. It connected with the old building through a newly cut archway on the ground floor. The main stairway was straightened to provide access to the upper floor. The first floor of the new 35 by 58 foot addition now housed the main mailing room with numerous iron racks holding bags for the outgoing mail and several drop boxes for city, island, and foreign items. Leading from the mailing room were the Superintendent's office, the fumigating room, and bicycle room. It cost some \$13,000. 17

Photos of the building at this time show the addition along Bethel Street, with three new openings on each floor - these are doors on the lower level. There are new rain gutters along Bethel Street; shutters have been removed, to be replaced with canvas awnings. The Merchant Street frontage now has a wooden awning across the entire front shading the upper windows; the original verandah covers the first floor area, and lock boxes occupy the entire front of the building, the pillars and archways having been eliminated during the 1898 installation of the new brass lock boxes.

On June 14, 1900, the Honolulu Post Office became a unit of the United States Postal System, handling a deluge of mail from persons wanting last-day cancellations by the Republic of Hawaii and 1st-day cancellations by the United States. The formal transfer of property to the United States Government did not occur until May 1903. 18

Nineteen years later, on May 1, 1922, the post office was removed to the Federal Building several blocks away on the corner of Merchant and Richards Streets, and the old building was returned to the Territory of Hawaii. Plans were drawn up to construct a postal sub-station (to be leased back to the Federal Government) and to remodel the rest of the building for the use of the Territorial Tax Office. This work was completed in 1924 at a cost in excess of \$19,000. The Territorial Tax Office moved to their new building on Queen Street in September 1939, apparently leaving the postal sub-station the sole occupant of the building. 19

News articles of December 1945, considering the plight of the overcrowded traffic courts, spoke of moving them across the street to the "old tax building" on Merchant and Bethel Streets. It was also known in 1945 as the Old Honolulu Post Office. The Report of the Superintendent of Public Works for the year ending June 30, 1945 is the last

NOTES - HISTORICAL INFORMATION

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3. PCA 1871, March 25.
4. AH - Min of Fin/ Report/ 1868, April 18.  
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6. Haw Gaz 1870, March 2; 1871, February 8; 1871, March 17, 25;  
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13. THA 1930, p. 34-40; 1882, p. 67; 1884, p. 69; 1889, p. 67.
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15. AH - Min of Int/ Reports/ 1886, 1888, 1890.  
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AH - Fin Dept/ 1894, February 6 - Repley to Damon.  
AH - Fin Dept/ 1894, March 19 - Bids for furn mail bags.  
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    same / Report/ 1895, December 31, p. 36.  
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    same / Report/ 1897, December 31, p. 3.  
AH - PMG/ Report/ 1897, December 31.  
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    Paradise of the Pacific, December 1900, p. 27-29.  
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18. PCA 1900, June 14, p. 9.  
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For a single good brief discussion of the post office see: Greer,  
Richard A., "Merchant Street Notes." Hawaii Historical Review, Vol. I,  
No. 2 (January 1963), p. 23-24.

Prepared by,

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September 1966

## ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION

The original two-story building was located on an irregularly shaped lot on the east corner of the intersection of Merchant and Bethel Streets. An open one-story portico on Merchant Street sheltered the postal lock boxes.

## EXTERIOR

Overall Dimensions - Original two-story building approximately 55' x 55'. A two-story addition, approximately 33' x 60', was built in 1900 facing on Bethel Street.

Wall Construction - The original portion with its rusticated masonry, round and square headed openings, and delicately-proportioned Tuscan portico is a good example of classic design for a public building. The durable concrete decorative forms are still well-preserved. Exterior bearing walls of the original section were built of rusticated solid concrete blocks approximately 12" x 14" x 24" in size. This is apparently the first building in Hawaii in which this type of material was used. News reports of the time indicate that the completion was delayed due to the excessive time required to assure proper curing of the blocks. The builder, J. G. Osborne, a year later used this material in the construction of the Hawaiian Hotel, now demolished.

The balustrade above the portico on Merchant Street was constructed of precast and poured concrete; a broken portion of the top rail of the main balustrade exposes a 5/8" smooth round iron bar. This indicates that the columns, lintels between columns and other lintels apparently were also reinforced with iron bars. Some attempts had been made in England and on the Continent to strengthen concrete with iron bars, but there seems to be no evidence of this type construction at this date in the United States.

The exterior walls of the addition of 1900 are built of brick finished on the exterior with a cement plaster finish to match the rusticated form of the original concrete blocks. The upper balustrade and cornice of the original portion are of cast and poured concrete; these elements on the 1900 addition are of sheet metal and are badly corroded.

Openings, Doorways and Windows - On the original structure there was a series of structural arched openings, mostly filled with lock boxes, in the original wall of the Merchant Street portico. With the addition of office space in the 1920's, steel columns replaced the wall and a similar exterior wall with arches was constructed adjacent to the columns on the edge of the sidewalk. Only one of the original arches, that near Bethel Street, still remains, and the opening was changed from a doorway to a window.

Other openings, first and second floor, have segmental, almost flat heads. They have recessed spandrels of concrete below the large double-hung wood windows.

Roofs - The hipped roof of the original portion is supported by wood trusses; the pitch is approximately 8 in 12. It was roofed with corrugated metal, but this material has now been covered with roll composition roofing. The added section is also hip roofed with a large skylight over the central hallway.

## INTERIOR

Floor Plans - Written records and a plan sheet (1894 to 1897) indicate that there have been many changes of interior partitions since its initial construction. This floor plan shows two stairways in the old section and the open portico with lock boxes. Beginning in 1894, the second floor was used for a savings bank, money orders and parcel post. The addition of 1900 greatly increased the floor space. After the main post office moved from this building to the Federal Building in 1922, a portion on the first floor on Bethel Street was used as a branch post office. Most of the open portico was enclosed with a new wall to add office space which supplemented the two courtrooms on the first floor. A single stairway served the second floor which was used for City-County offices.

Stairway - The wood stairway ascends from a side entrance in the new section to a skylighted central hall on the second floor.

Flooring - Floors on both levels are wood; courtroom floors are covered with linoleum.

Wall and Ceiling Finish - Lower walls of the courtrooms are hard plaster; upper walls and ceilings are acoustical plaster. Walls and ceilings of the upper rooms are plastered.

Doorways and Doors - No original interior or exterior doors remain. Windows and original door openings have moulded trim,  $7\frac{1}{2}$ " in width.

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September 1966

APPROVED:

*A. Lewis Koue*

DATE: 6/8/67

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PHOTOGRAPHS

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